



## Loss, Diaspora, Displacement, and Parentage in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*

*Perte, diaspora, déplacement et parenté dans No Great Mischief d'Alistair  
MacLeod*

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## Loss, Diaspora, Displacement, and Parentage in Alistair MacLeod's *No Great Mischief*

Set in the wake of the Highland Clearances of the 18th century, the late Alistair MacLeod's only published novel, *No Great Mischief*, explores how Scottish immigrants in Eastern Canada were challenged to preserve their clan bonds and Scottish traditions in a new land. Spanning over two centuries, the family history of narrator Alexander MacDonald maps out the generational effects of the Scottish diaspora on the extended clan, *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, including loss of land, language, music, and clan members. The *clann Chalum Ruaidh*—though in many ways, dispersed even within Canada itself—is never spiritually divided, as kinship bonds are repetitively enforced, and its members remain, as Lily Cho writes of diasporic communities, “connected by a sense of a homeland” despite their being “marked by loss” (Cho, 2007, pp. 12, 19). *No Great Mischief* begins with the loss of Moidart, Scotland, and the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*'s migration from a lost homeland to Canada illuminates the clan members as undoubted diasporic subjects. But even though the Highland Clearances were foundational to the Scottish diaspora, is the diasporic experience necessarily a result of a territorial loss of the homeland, or is there something beyond the physical loss of Scotland that permeates the lived experiences of generations to follow? Along with the loss of Scotland, the novel also begins with the loss of Calum Ruadh's wives, and ends with the loss of Calum MacDonald (the eldest living relative in the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*), with no shortage of clan deaths in between. The novel is shaped by such familial loss and the characters, as products of the Scottish diaspora, are challenged to preserve their Scottish traditions, language, lore and sense of the homeland in Canada amidst these tragedies in a way that transcends a physical departure from the home country. While the novel is about the familial relationships that are sustained by a collective connection to Scotland during a lifetime of cultural preservation in Canada, these connections are strained more specifically by a significant loss of parentage that haunts the text. That is, the diasporic experience in the novel is particularly manifested in the deaths of the parents of

characters such as Alexander, Catherine, Calum, the initial children of Calum Ruadh, and Grandfather. That is, while parentage is a means with which these characters connect to Scotland and Scottish tradition, the preservation process is hindered by the deaths of parents in the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. The mother and father figures in the clan function as the closest ties to the Scottish homeland generationally and genealogically, and as they disappear, these ties to homeland, history and memory become obscured, and the children of the clan, displaced.

In contemporary scholarship, the word “diaspora” carries a history of particular usage and meaning that makes it difficult, and for some controversial, to utilize in reference to just *any* dispersed community. It is marked by what Khachig Tölölyan calls “the ‘Jewish paradigm’” (cited in Basu, 2007, p. 10), which defines diaspora as that which is “characterized primarily by the coercive nature of the forces resulting in the uprooting and resettlement of a population outside the boundaries of its established homeland” as opposed to the “voluntary and cumulative emigration of individuals or small groups” (*ibid.*, p. 10). Tölölyan’s distinction between voluntary and involuntary migration engages with diaspora specifically as a territorial displacement. Arguing for an acknowledgment of a “Scottish diaspora”, Paul Basu addresses what many believe to be the traumatic nature of Scottish emigration following the Highland Clearances, differentiating between voluntary and involuntary Scottish diaspora by comparing “the removal of the small tenantry from their traditional land holdings [...] throughout the Highlands and Islands so that the land could be opened up for large-scale sheep farming” to the intentional migrations of those in search of “work, land and economic security” outside of Scotland (2007, pp. 13, 15). The migration of MacLeod’s *clann Chalum Ruaidh* is both involuntary and territorial as Alexander relates that “anyone who knows the history of Scotland, particularly that of the Highlands and the Western Isles in the period around 1779, is not hard-pressed to understand the reasons for their leaving” (MacLeod, 1999, p. 20). With the provision of the year 1779—only thirty-four years after the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745—Alexander implies a traumatic past for the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* wherein the clan’s migration from Moidart, Scotland to Cape Breton, Canada is directly linked to the Highland Clearances. Scotland is lost to the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* territorially in that they “sold their cattle and [gave] up the precious end timbers to their house, which in that *land* and in that time were hard to come by [my emphasis]” (*ibid.*, p. 21), but it is also a territorial gain because Calum Ruadh is headed “for Nova Scotia, ‘the *land* of trees [my emphasis]’” and further, “he had been told in a Gaelic letter, there would be *land* for him if he would come [my emphasis]” (*ibid.*).

While, in the context of the Highland Clearances, the Scottish diaspora is at once territorial, in keeping with Tölölyan's definition of diaspora, Cho proposes a more abstract understanding of diaspora as a "condition of subjectivity" (*ibid.*, p. 14). As she writes, this subjectivity is "marked by the contingencies of long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession" (*ibid.*, p. 11) wherein the diasporic condition means "to be marked by loss" (*ibid.*, p. 19), particularly the loss of the homeland in a historical and mnemonic way, rather than a territorial way: "Loss is both in the past and in the potentiality of the future. This understanding of loss takes diaspora out of a relation to land and territory and into one which is bound to the problem of history and memory." (*Ibid.*, p. 16) That is, she distinguishes between migration itself, and being "marked by the memory of migration" (*ibid.*, p. 19). Similarly, in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin assert that "Diaspora does not simply refer to geographical dispersal but also to the vexed questions of identity, memory and home which such displacement produces" (2002, pp. 217–8). There is no question that the homeland is lost by the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* in a way that goes beyond territory, and as Alexander relates family stories, stories within stories, stories of others, and memories, this loss, or rather, the struggle against loss becomes apparent. There is a collective consciousness of the Scottish diaspora in the novel's characters in that Calum Ruadh's first voyage acts as an anchor for the narrative that is constantly returned to. The narrative about Calum Ruadh functions as what Robin Cohen describes as "the myth of a common origin" which "serves to 'root' a diasporic consciousness", "give it legitimacy" and even inspire "highly romanticised fantasies of the 'old country'" (Cohen cited in Basu, 2007, p. 17). The novel's preoccupation with the original clan members' journey from Scotland fuels the collective memory of the homeland that is lost and longed for, and at times, even glorified throughout. Both Cohen's description and MacLeod's depiction of origin as mythical point to Paul Ricœur's differentiation between "beginning" and "origin" in *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Here, he calls beginnings "historic", describing them as existing within a "constellation of dated events", and he calls origin "mythic", defining it as that which "designates the upsurge of the act of taking a distance [...] which consists in the recourse to the exteriority of the archival trace" (Ricœur, 2004, pp. 139–40). This distinction between historical record and mythical origin renders origin illusory—a notion confirmed by Alexander early on when he, in reference to Calum Ruadh's voyage to Canada, explains that "there are some facts and perhaps some fantasies" in what the MacDonalds know about Calum Ruadh (1999, p. 20). The

inaugural Calum Ruadh who touched down in Cape Breton in 1779 is constantly drawn into the present through culturally significant mnemonic devices such as songs, stories, the Gaelic language, and even the deaths and births of various clan members. Alexander's parents' deaths on the ice and his twin sister Catherine's transatlantic flights (*ibid.*, p. 192) reach back to Catherine MacPherson's oceanic demise (*ibid.*, p. 57–8). And Calum's timely death on Cape Breton soil (*ibid.*, p. 282) is only made meaningful alongside the constant references to Calum Ruadh's Point where Calum Ruadh of 1779 is buried (*ibid.*, p. 12–13). Through frequent reference to Calum Ruadh, Alexander situates his cultural past in the present in the same way that MacLeod's short fiction often “[portrays...] an ancestral past that continually affects the present” (Urquhart, 2001, p. 37).

The sense of collective memory and the notion that the diasporic loss of homeland is analogous to a loss of cultural memory are both explored when Catherine and Alexander, as adults, try to remember a particular old, Gaelic song together. Catherine says, “There was an old Gaelic song that Grandma used to sing that was composed when the people were leaving Scotland. There was a line in it which said, ‘The birds will be back but we will not be back’, or something like that. Do you remember it?” To which Alexander replies, “Yes [...] *Fuadach nan Gaidheal*, the ‘Dispersion of the Highlanders’” (MacLeod, 1999, p. 227). Cho's and Basu's claims for collective memory in diasporic communities are illuminated by the fact that the siblings sing this song so many centuries after the Clearances because Alexander and Catherine were not direct victims of the “Dispersion of the Highlanders”. The fact that a song which laments those affected by the Clearances is passed down through the generations suggests a cultural trauma that is manifested in collective memory. Even though Catherine and Alexander were not cleared in the 18th century, they are plagued by a sense of cultural mourning and loss that seems almost inherited, or indicative of what Jane Urquhart describes as an “unidentifiable sorrow that accompanies” the diasporic subject's “loss of landscape and kin” (2001, p. 38). The way in which the siblings struggle to remember “the Gaelic words” which “[come] to [them], hesitatingly at first” before “gaining force, welling up from wherever it [is] that song [is] stored” emphasizes their loss. They “[sing] all that [they know] in Gaelic, three verses and the chorus, looking to each other for clues at the beginning of lines when [they seem] uncertain” (MacLeod, 1999, p. 227), which illuminates the *loss* of homeland as one of history and memory that Cho underlines, because memory fails to summon the traditional music and language that constitutes the Scottish identity that is being reached to. Further, the scene exposes how orality “forms human

beings into close-knit groups” (Ong, 2002, p. 72) and “fosters personality structures that [...] are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those common among literates” (*ibid.*, p. 67). That is, it is through oral traditions such as stories, Gaelic language and songs that MacLeod emphasizes the shared and collective memory, and in some ways, a shared, diasporic identity.

The narrative of Calum Ruadh’s journey to Canada as told to Alexander by Grandfather demonstrates how the diasporic experience includes a loss of history and memory beyond the loss of territory. When Alexander’s Grandfather tells him that “After they landed on the shores of Pictou [...] *Calum Ruadh* broke down and wept and he cried for two whole days and [...] [his children] were all around him, including the dog, and no one knew what to do” (MacLeod, 1999, p. 24), Alexander—as a young boy—fails to understand why a grown man would cry. Initially angered by Alexander’s comment, Grandfather describes Calum Ruadh’s loss as one of history and kin:

[Calum Ruadh] was [...] crying for his *history* [my emphasis]. He had left his country and lost his wife and spoke a foreign language. He had left as a husband and arrived as a widower and a grandfather, and he was responsible for all those people clustered around him. He was [...] like the goose who points the V, and he temporarily wavered and lost his courage. (*Ibid.*, p. 25)

This nostalgic retelling of the first voyage by Grandfather explicates Cho’s assertion that loss of the homeland constitutes a loss of history rather than territory in a most detailed manner. Calum Ruadh is *not* crying for Scotland or territory, but rather for “his history”. Like MacLeod’s short fiction, the novel is “resonant with” “the desire to preserve that which was, and even that which is, against the heartbreaking ravages of time; to preserve not necessarily with factual accuracy, but rather with something that one can only call [...] emotional truth [sic]” (Urquhart, 2001, p. 39). Calum Ruadh is depicted as heavily burdened with the responsibility of a similar preservation wherein he is challenged to maintain, support and protect the history, heritage and clan with which he travelled to Canada. The passage explicitly demonstrates how the diasporic subject is marked by loss in that the voyage causes a loss of homeland *and* a loss of kin. But what is most remarkable about this vital passage is Grandfather’s identification of Calum Ruadh as both a father *and* a “grandfather”. It indicates the beginning of an additional generation for which he is responsible, and which underlines the importance of historicity for MacLeod’s characters: “in a single story, MacLeod’s characters frequently span several generations, thus establishing historicity as a human value” (Francis Berces cited in Hiscock, 2000, p. 51). This valuation of historicity in the characters

illuminates Cho's understanding of diasporic loss as *historical* rather than territorial. Further, Calum Ruadh's sense of responsibility in the passage goes beyond his being a parent and grandparent in that he also, at this moment, recognizes himself as a parent to *clann Chalum Ruaidh* as a whole as "[his children]" stand "all around him".

The death of parents and the act of reconstructing one's own history after these deaths is a central thread in the novel that MacLeod is quite conscious of (Rogers, 2001, p. 22). And the importance of parent/child relationships to the text is emphasized by the repetitive use of the title *clann Chalum Ruaidh* to refer to Alexander's family in the past and present. It would seem that most often people concretize clans and clan bonds as simple family groups with those expected familial connections, but in fact, the Gaelic translation of "clann" is "children" ("clann", *Essential Gaelic Dictionary*, 2004, p. 31). MacLeod's *clann Chalum Ruaidh* is not simply a family and rather, the emphasis on its being a "clan" is purposive and emphatic of a parent/child relationship as well as a generational inheritance of shared memory and history. MacLeod explicates this function of the clan during the scene in which Alexander is quizzed by parents from neighbouring towns, as to who his parents are:

[...] after our [hockey] games we would be invited into the homes of our hosts, where we would inevitably be quizzed by their parents or grandparents. "What's your name?" "What's your father's name?" "What's your mother's father's name?" And almost without fail, in the case of myself and my cousins, there would come a knowing look across the face of our questioners and they would say, in response to our answer, "Ah, you are the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*", as if that somehow explained everything. They would pronounce *clann* in the Gaelic way so that it sounded like "kwown". "Ah, you are the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*", meaning "Ah, you are the children (or the family) of the red Calum". (1999, p. 28)

The parents and grandparents of their hosts play a sort of genealogical tracing game wherein they attempt to pinpoint an origin for Alexander and his cousins. The progression from "your name" to "your father's name" to "your mother's father's name" moves across three generations, venturing increasingly into earlier history. But more strikingly, it constitutes the tracking of a clan name. That is, asking for the father's surname and then the mother's maiden name demonstrates a search for the clan's identifier. As a young boy, Alexander makes reference to this parent/child relationship when he remarks of his uncle that "it seemed strange that such a big man could be the father of [his cousin], while, at the same time, being the son or 'boy' of [his] Grandpa" (*ibid.*, p. 69). And in a very similar scene, Alexander's Grandma is depicted as "looking out her

window towards the ocean which had swallowed up ‘the children’ who were the *parents* of the young men under discussion [my emphasis]” (*ibid.*, p. 84–5). Both scenes highlight an interest in the status of an individual as *both* parent and child, which works towards a better understanding of the clan and the generational aspects inherent in diasporic subjectivity. Someone who is both a child *and* a parent has one foot in each generation—that which precedes and that which proceeds—much in the same way the diasporic subject remains divided by the homeland and the new land. In addition to this divide between parent and child, individual identity also becomes indistinct as it is superseded by the collective clan identity and family namesakes.

Historically, Scottish clans adopted aspects of the feudal system, and their formulation included a clan chief, ownership of land and succession by primogeniture, and following the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, clans were dissolved and made illegal by British legislature (“clan”, *Oxford Reference*). The fact that clan leadership was successive to the eldest child is pertinent to the novel because it complements the notion that the deaths of parents in the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* constitute a loss of ties to the homeland in that, with each new successor, the clan gets one step further away from its collective origin, history and memory. In addition to the title *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, the novel also emphasizes a parent/child dynamic with the phrase, “My hope is constant in thee, Clan Donald” which is uttered a total of seven times in the text (*ibid.*, pp. 88, 92, 95, 118, 191, 202 and 209). The phrase—“which is what Robert the Bruce was supposed to have said to the MacDonalds at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314” (*ibid.*, p. 88)—really means, My hope is constant in thee, “children” of Donald, much in the same way as the construction of Scottish surnames indicates that one is the progeny of another: MacDonald means, “son of Donald” where “mac” directly means “son” (“mac”, *Essential Gaelic Dictionary*, 2004, p. 79). The fact that a clan is made up of “children” suggests that the members share a common parentage—Calum Ruadh, or “Donald”, or even Scotland itself.

In terms of parentlessness, the deaths of Alexander’s parents (and brother Colin) are potentially the most impactful parent deaths in the narrative. The tragedy of their demise works to exemplify how loss of parentage in the novel points to a larger loss of cultural history and connection to the homeland, through the capability and incapability of Calum and Alexander to remember their mother and father. Alexander’s parents are described as having “vanished” upon falling through the ice (MacLeod, 1999, p. 51), and *only* his brother Colin’s body is ever recovered: “My parents were not found that day, or the next, or in the days or months that followed” (*ibid.*, p. 52). Years later, on a visit to the

island, Grandpa remarks “I guess they’re still under [the sea] somewhere” (*ibid.*, p. 214). The fact that his parents’ bodies are never found becomes symbolic for the obliteration of yet another tie to the homeland. As mentioned, diasporic subjects sometimes mythologize and romanticize the lost homeland (Basu, 2007, p. 17), and in the same way as the original Calum Ruadh becomes an illusory and mythologized point of origin for the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* that is both “fac[t]” and “fantas[y]” (MacLeod, 1999, p. 20), Alexander and Catherine create a similarly illusory origin in their parents. They are described as “yearning for the drowned *idealized* people [their parents] who had gone into the sea [my emphasis]” (*ibid.*, p. 67). Catherine suggests that “perhaps [Alexander and she] *idealize* [their] parents too much because [they] scarcely remember them [my emphasis]” (*ibid.*, p. 234). Such a mythologization of the parents is paralleled to that of the Highlands which Basu suggests are often mythologized by Scottish diasporic subjects (*ibid.*, p. 17). In one of the most effective scenes in the novel, Calum asks Alexander, “Do you remember our parents?” to which Alexander responds, “I’m not sure [...]. Some things. I’m not sure how many of the memories are real and how many I’ve sort of made up from other people’s stories” (*ibid.*, p. 14). The deaths of Alexander’s parents lead him into a reconstructive process, and by use of stories and memories told, and photographs shared by other members of his family, he strives to access his lost history—although the past he reconstructs constitutes a sort of idealization. On the same subject, and when asked by Shelagh Rogers, “What do you think memories are made of?” MacLeod himself responded,

[Alexander and Catherine] don’t remember [their parents] as real people. When you’re sixteen your father and mother are real people but if your parents are taken from you when you’re three, maybe you idolize them [...]. Between Calum and Alexander and his twin sister, there are thirteen years [...]. But if you are three and people are always saying to you “oh, you should have known your mother, oh, you should have known your father”, then you make them up in terms of what others have given to you [...] Calum [...] remembers their father and remembers their mother [...]. But for these younger people, they don’t remember them at all. And this is why they are always looking at the photograph albums because that’s sort of all they have... pictures. Both the physical pictures [...] or the pictures they recreate about themselves and about their parents are kind of imaginary. (Rogers, 2001, pp. 21-22)

In some ways, MacLeod gives us, in Alexander, the very emergence of the diasporic subject in that Alexander turns “back upon those markers of the self—homeland, memory, loss” (Cho, 2007, p. 11) in order to make

sense of his present. But the fact that Alexander's recollections of his parents are those of someone else confirms the severance of that tie to the homeland. It is productive to consider how Alexander's reconstruction of his parents resembles the reconstruction of the lost homeland through shared history and memory that takes place throughout the novel in the sharing of stories, song, drink, and music. The idealization of the parents is correlative with that of the homeland and the clan's ancestors, and Alexander's tendency to fantasize Calum Ruadh of 1779—the figurehead of the clan's shared history—complements the notion that the myth of origin can include a “highly romanticized fantas[y]” of the homeland (Cohen cited in Basu, p. 17).

The very *nature* of Alexander's parents' deaths paired with that of Catherine MacPherson also reveals how loss of parents in the novel is synonymous with the loss of the homeland. Catherine MacPherson's demise is the ultimate transnational death as she is “sewn in a canvas bag and thrown overboard, never to see the New World on which she had based such hopes” (MacLeod, 1999, p. 23). Her death corresponds *exactly* with the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*'s initial loss of Scotland. Literally, as they are in the process of leaving Scotland and arriving in Canada—in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean—they lose their mother. It is particularly striking that her death marks the birth of *Catriona na mara* (“Catherine of the Sea”—Calum Ruadh's first granddaughter) because it *emphasizes* the generational complication inherent in parentlessness. As the matron of the family is lost, the first of a brand new generation is born which illuminates the generational and temporal distance between the clan's origins and succession. Catherine's death is landless, meaning she no longer has access to Scotland physically or historically, and she likewise does not have access to the New World, “[...] never able to arrive at the new land nor get back to the old” (*ibid.*, p. 192). In death, she has all the makings of a diasporic subject who belongs neither in her homeland, nor the new, Canada. Mikhail Bakhtin's “chronotope of threshold” which is “the chronotope of crisis and break in a life” is useful in thinking through Catherine's death because she perishes on the threshold between Scotland and Canada—a liminal space wherein, as Bakhtin would say, “crisis events occur” (1981, p. 248). The ocean remains a liminal space of crisis beyond Catherine's nautical demise in that Alexander's parents too perish in the ocean between two land masses, although they die in Canadian proximity. Even so, their aquatic death operates as a reminder of their lost history before them, and is used, in the text, to bring the past into the present by linking one loss to another (MacLeod, 1999, p. 57–8). In regards to MacLeod's short fiction, Claire Omhovère notes a similar repetition of history in “Clearances” and “As Birds Bring Forth

the Sun” wherein “History is presented as a crushing inevitability” and “the character’s [sic] present a puny re-enactment of past oppressions” (2006, p. 58). With this, Omhovère asserts that the “passage of time is [...] irrelevant or, at least, secondary to the territorial clashes that go on pitting individuals and communities against one another” in the present (*ibid.*). Likewise, Colin Nicholson explores how, in MacLeod’s short fiction, “Repetition prevaricates temporality, interrogating sameness and difference across the passage of time” (2001, p. 99). A similar inevitable re-enactment of history permeates *No Great Mischief*, and the “passage of time” certainly becomes irrelevant when the *clann Calum Ruaidh’s* feud with the French Canadian miners and Calum’s subsequent murder of Fern Picard (MacLeod, 1999, p. 257-258) reach back to the often referenced complicated relationship between Scotland and France in which France’s support of “the auld alliance” could have prevented Scotland’s (*ibid.*, p. 162). The phrase “If only the ships had come from France” as well as different paraphrases of it occur five times throughout the novel in reference to the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 (*ibid.*, pp. 162, 208, 237, 263). Calum’s murder of Fern Picard functions as a repetitive response to a complicated history, and in both the present and the past, an alliance between nations might have resulted in a very different outcome.

While the deaths of Alexander’s parents cause him to enter into a reconstruction of history through inherited memory, they take a different toll on Calum and the other MacDonald brothers. The loss of parentage is also very like the loss of the homeland in that, like losing one’s homeland results in displacement, the deaths of Calum’s parents displace him and the other elder brothers. *No Great Mischief* has been described as a novel that “deal[s] on some level with the traumatic and challenging effects of global capitalism and conflict” which includes the forced migration of labour populations, and resultant conditions of displacement and dispossession (Macdonald, 2006, pp. 128–9). The older MacDonald boys’ loss of parentage is representative of a loss of the homeland because, with the absence of their parental ties to the homeland, they are deprived of a domestic space, and the deaths prompt their displacement. They discontinue school and “[move] back to the old *Calum Ruadh* house [their] grandparents had lived in before” they “[became] people of the town” (MacLeod, 1999, p. 61). Alexander and Catherine are similarly displaced in that they stay at their grandparents’ house for the next sixteen years, rather than return to their original home (*ibid.*, p. 57). While the movement of Calum and the older brothers is not directly resultant of the political traumas of 18th-century Scotland, the deaths of his parents go part in part with an uprooting process that leaves him and his brothers at a significant loss. Cho argues that “to be unhomed is a process. To

be unhomely is a state of diasporic consciousness” (2007, p. 19). In a way, the deaths mark the “unhoming” of the elder brothers in that they do not return to live on the island and they remain unhomed for the remainder of the novel, seeking work in Peru, Africa, and Ontario (MacLeod, 1999, pp. 109–10). But their loss of parentage also elucidates the diasporic experience because, like losing a homeland unhomes, losing parents makes them unhomely—a state of diasporic consciousness that permeates Calum’s and his brothers’ experiences in Canada.

Yet, perhaps more strikingly than the sense of displacement and loss experienced by Calum and the elder brothers, the deaths of Calum’s parents immediately transform him from a parentless child into a sort of childless parent. That is, in the traditional clan systems and according to primogeniture, Calum would become a head figure in the clan—in the context of his immediate family—and *should* become a father figure of sorts to the clan. In a discussion of the opposing occupations of Calum and Alexander, Janice Kulyk Keefer implies that Calum resembles a father figure:

[...] just as, in “The Boat”, the main source of tension and conflict arises from the opposing choices made by father and son as to their life’s work—fishing and teaching/writing—so too in *No Great Mischief*. In fact, the conflict is curiously reconfigured. First, the occupations of the two brothers, Calum and Alexander—miner and orthodontist—emerge as diametrically opposed [...]. (2001, pp. 73–4)

Although Keefer does not explicitly deem Calum a father figure, her suggestion that the father/son opposition in “The Boat” is “reconfigured” in *No Great Mischief* through the disparity between Calum’s and Alexander’s occupations presents Calum as father figure. Further, Calum’s identity as father figure emerges when we consider how he is a character of tradition taking on one of the “traditional forms of masculine labour indigenous to Nova Scotia” (*ibid.*, p. 73), while Alexander’s occupation contributes to his being a “modern man” (Rogers, 2001, p. 20). That is, if parents, in MacLeod’s novel, resemble the closest ties to the homeland, then Calum emerges as someone who is closer to tradition than Alexander. After the deaths of their parents, he returns to an old, traditional line of work while Alexander ultimately pursues dentistry which is suggestive of an inauthenticity in the present where patients desire artificial identities (MacLeod, 1999, p. 82). This inauthenticity is emphasized first by Calum’s carrying out “honest and authentic labour” (Keefer, 2001, p. 80), and more specifically by Calum’s tooth extraction by fishing boat and work horse only pages prior (MacLeod, 1999, p. 81). After the MacDonald parents’ death on the ice, Calum—with the exception of

his grandparents—as a man of tradition and practitioner of old ways, replaces his parents as the closest tie to the homeland.

In conjunction with the parentlessness of Alexander and his siblings, MacLeod discusses the significance of Grandfather's loss of parentage. According to MacLeod, "[the] idea of understanding where you came from is a central one within the novel" and particularly important to characters like Grandfather who, "because he never saw his own father [...] looks at himself in the mirror and tries to recreate this absentee dead father by looking backwards" (Rogers, 2001, p. 22) and later, by reading Scottish history. Grandfather is described by Catherine as having been "raised in a house without a father, only a mother, and years later he [is] with a daughter who had no mother, only a father. He was always in the midst of loss" (MacLeod, 1999, p. 230). The novel is inundated with parentlessness, but it is the very act of piecing together one's history that illuminates the similarities between parentage and a sense of the homeland. In a theorization of the novel in the context of diasporic discourse, it is important to note that Grandfather does not necessarily seek out where he came from in a physical sense, or even in a cultural sense, but rather in a *historical* sense, which undoubtedly reaches back to Cho's claim that loss of homeland is "bound to the problem of history" (2007, p. 16). Catherine diagnoses Grandfather's preoccupation with history as a result of his being "so ill at ease when Grandpa would start those little jokes about" illegitimate children—because Grandfather himself is a fatherless, illegitimate child:

Perhaps that's why he became so interested in history [...]. He felt that if you read everything and put the pieces all together the real truth would emerge. It would be, somehow, like carpentry. Everything would fit together just so, and you would see in the end something like "a perfect building called the past". Perhaps he felt that if he couldn't understand his immediate past, he would try to understand his distant past. (MacLeod, 1999, p. 234)

This passage demonstrates how parentage shares a likeness with conceptions of the homeland in the novel because it draws a direct parallel between Grandfather's fatherlessness and his attempt not only to understand "his immediate past", but more strikingly, "his *distant* past" [my emphasis], through the study of history. For Grandfather, his fatherlessness is synonymous with a lack of cultural history, which highlights him as a diasporic subject in the sense that the parent figure is representative of a homeland, or a tie to the homeland. Grandfather is further figuratively parentless when it comes to his mother because she fails to serve as a subsequent tie to the homeland by refusing to even speak of his father, and forbidding him to so much as ask about him (MacLeod, 1999,

pp. 113–4). His fatherlessness can even be understood as an extended fatherlessness for later generations of the clan. At one point, Alexander reflects that he has “a haunting sympathy... for [...] the man [his Grandfather’s father] who died, crushed beneath the load of logs on the skidway, perhaps without realizing he had set a life in motion, which would in turn result in even such a life as [Alexander’s]” (*ibid.*, p. 32). With this, Grandfather, then, becomes an inadequate link to the homeland for younger generations because he himself still struggles to locate his own history and parentage whether in the mirror (*ibid.*, p. 114), or in *A History of the Scottish Highlands* (*ibid.*, p. 264). He also represents a paralysis in the novel as he searches for his past throughout, but never seems to find it. Grandfather “die[s] reading” the aforementioned history book (*ibid.*), which suggests that it was a search to the death, perhaps unfruitful because he never finds his sense of self and history in a textbook. With this, MacLeod differentiates between recorded history that is written, factual and chronological, and cultural memory that is more akin to the mythical origins that Alexander deems, at times, illusory and imagined (*ibid.*, pp. 20, 24). He is a diasporic subject, searching and yearning for an identity that links him to that homeland which was manifest in his parentage (nowhere else), and then lost in their literal and figurative deaths, but he never quite satiates his hunger for history and identity with book in hand, and becomes “overtaken by his own history” (*ibid.*, p. 265).

The novel begins and ends with Calums, introducing Calum Ruadh of 1779 early on and concluding with the death of Alexander’s oldest brother, Calum. After phoning Alexander and saying, “It’s time” (*ibid.*, p. 276), Calum and Alexander make the drive from Toronto to Cape Breton—a return to the homeland away from the original homeland (Scotland). In the final moments of Calum’s life, he becomes a parallel figure to Calum Ruadh who made the first journey over from Scotland. As Alexander drives within Cape Breton, he turns to his brother and reflects:

I turn to Calum once again. I reach for his cooling hand which lies on the seat beside him. I touch the Celtic ring. This is the man who carried me on his shoulders when I was three. Carried me across the ice from the island, but could never carry me back again. Out on the island the neglected fresh-water well pours fourth its gift of sweetness into the whitened darkness of the night. Ferry the dead. *Fois do t’anam*. Peace to his soul. (*Ibid.*, p. 283)

The repetition of *Fois do t’anam*, the words inscribed on Calum Ruadh’s grave (*ibid.*, p. 27), works to frame the entire narrative by bringing the lineage from one Calum full circle to another as the phrase is only mentioned twice, both times in reference to each Calum. Alexander’s touching

Calum's "Celtic ring" emphasizes this cyclicity that brings everything together first, in that the piece of jewellery is a *ring*, and second, in that the ring's being "Celtic" suggests that it is adorned with traditional celtic knots which are often cyclical or demonstrative of "the never-ending circle" (*ibid.*, p. 223). For Karl E. Jirgens, the image of Calum's Celtic ring is suggestive of "a cyclical and endless pattern of departure and return" (2001, p. 84) that is emulated in the very narrative of the novel, and the ring's "pattern [...] represents the flux of nature and being, as well as the inter-connectedness of all life" (*ibid.*, p. 88). Beyond the repetition of *Fois do t'anam* and the ring's being suggestive of a cyclical echoing, Alexander's description of Calum as "the man who carried [him] [...] across the ice from the island, but could never carry [him] back again" is yet another a skillful echoing of Calum Ruadh's initial carrying of his family over from Scotland and inability to ever carry them back. The scene parallels the two Calums in a way that marks Calum as a father figure to the clan who was, like Calum Ruadh, "responsible for all th[e] people clustered around him". Keefer argues that Calum's fall after the death of Fern Picard is a narrative that contrasts the story of his parents' death: "We might call it 'the doom of Calum': his fall from grace, in order to defend the honour of his clan, his harsh period of penitential exile, and his long-delayed redemption, in the form of a permanent return to his homeland, to the dark earth of Cape Breton." (2001, p. 79) She views this "doom" as that which marks the eradication of mining labour ("an ethic and aesthetic work which has vanished" [*ibid.*, p. 79] in history), but there is far more being elegized here than labour. Calum's "doom" marks the loss of another tie to the homeland. He, as a Calum Ruadh figure, defends the clan's honour out of responsibility, as the eldest. At the point of Calum's death, he remains the eldest member of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* as his Grandpa, Grandma and Grandfather are all long dead (MacLeod, 1999, pp. 264–5). His death marks the loss of a link to the homeland in that he, in the final years of his life, represents the closest thing to Scotland. Early in the novel and referring to their singing together, Alexander says, "[i]t is as if there is no break between [Calum's] ending and my beginning" (*ibid.*, p. 17). Just as Alexander picks up a melody where Calum leaves off, he so too picks up the responsibility of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* after Calum gives up his spirit in Cape Breton, one more generation removed from that which was so lost. But Alexander's new-found responsibility is not solely due to his being the successor in the MacDonald clan. Rather, his being narrator throughout the novel dictates that his most crucial responsibility to the clan is as storyteller. Jirgens suggests that, "as narrator, Alexander assumes his place as guardian of the story of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*" (2001, p. 94), but beyond mere "guardian" of the story, Alexander emerges more as a

“seanaichie”, a Gaelic word which, as he recalls early in his narrative, refers to an “older singe[r] or storytelle[r] of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*” who, moved by “the fire” of the kitchen stove “and its shadows”, “would ‘remember’ events from a Scotland which [he or she] had never seen, or see [the clan’s] future in the shadows of the flickering flames” (MacLeod, 1999, p. 65). Traditionally, in Ireland and Highland Scotland, a seanaichie was “professionally occupied in the study and transmission of traditional history, genealogy, and legend” (“sennachie”, *Oxford English Dictionary*). It is productive to think of Alexander as “seanaichie” rather than simple storyteller because it denotes a particular cultural significance that is tied specifically to Alexander’s Scottish homeland.

Discourse on diaspora and diasporic communities is complicated by the historical usage of the word and the difficulty of locating a widely satisfactory definition for “diaspora”. Operating from within the context of the Scottish diaspora or the “Dispersion of the Highlanders”, *No Great Mischief* demonstrates how diasporic communities cope with the loss of the homeland territorially, but more importantly, abstractly through cultural history and memory. Through a shared cultural memory and history of origination, the members of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* reach back to the homeland which—by reason of political circumstances—they had left so long ago, and their sense of the homeland and preservation of Scottish tradition is strengthened through their clan bonds throughout. But the most colourful thread that is sewn throughout MacLeod’s narrative is that of parentage and the parentlessness of central characters of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*. While a sense of the homeland is at times enforced through clan bonds, it is just as easily weakened through the loss of mother and father figures. That is, within the Scottish context, and the context of the clan system, parentlessness begins to stand for a loss similar to that of the homeland, in which, with the death of every parent, those links to the homeland through history and memory, are obscured and eventually lost.

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